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Reading between the lines on Iran

Reading between the lines of President Reagan's address to the nation on the negotiations in Iran, it is not hard to see what happened.

It was Jimmy Carter's failure to anticipate the downfall of the shah that led to the rise of Iran's current ruler, the Ayatollah Khomeini, an America-hater whose only redeeming trait is the fact that he detests Communists as much as he detests us. But who will follow Mr. Khomeini as the leader of that critically important country? If Iran, after his death, slides into Moscow's orbit, it will be the most ominous step toward World War III that the world has yet taken.

President Reagan was determined not to be caught napping, a la Mr. Carter. Evidently he had reason to believe there were factions in Tehran ready to talk to us and perhaps cut a deal.

But through whom should he act? Bitter experience has taught him that a secret initiative, once confided to congressional leaders, or to the State Department, or the Pentagon, or even the CIA, will be all over the front pages of *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* within 24 hours.

Sometimes — as in the recent case of the disinformation scheme aimed at unnerving Libya's Col. Qaddafi — disclosure merely ruins a



marginally useful operation. But if overtures to potential U.S. allies in post-Khomeini Iran were to come to light, the result might be to destroy our contacts and end all hope of an improvement in our relations with that key country.

So Mr. Reagan chose to act through the recently retired director of his own National Security Council, Robert McFarlane. Mr. McFarlane went secretly to Iran and apparently made some highly useful contacts there.

At some point in the negotiations the Iranians (not surprisingly) requested that the United States demonstrate its good faith by supplying

their country with some desperately needed spare parts for its fighter planes. After ascertaining that the items requested would not tip the delicate balance in the war between Iran and Iraq, Mr. Reagan approved the shipments and they were duly made.

This represented an explicit exception to the general Western embargo on arms for Iran, but it was thoroughly justified because it was part of an effort to end the very sort of behavior for which Iran is being embargoed.

Perhaps reciprocally, someone on our side brought up the subject of Iran's influence over the terrorist gangs in Lebanon who are holding several American hostages. The Iranians promised to see what could be done. As a result, at this writing three hostages have been released.

Up to this point our vigilant media, all of their usual leakers having been cut out of the loop, were still snoozing happily away. But then the basics of the story were discovered and disclosed by a Middle Eastern

newspaper, obviously at the behest of forces that wanted to derail the negotiations. The Democrats and the liberal media awoke with a start and promptly mashed the whole delicate fabric into the shape they like best: a political football.

Their basic ploy has been to ignore the real purpose of the negotiations — achieving a friendlier post-Khomeini Iran — and concentrate on their highly visible byproduct, the release of the hostages. This enables Mr. Reagan's critics to accuse him of trading "arms to Iran

for hostages in Lebanon" — allegedly in violation of the standing U.S. policy never to negotiate with terrorists.

But of course Mr. Reagan has not negotiated with terrorists. On the contrary, he has found a way to bring powerful pressures to bear on them and has used it effectively. Far more important, he is working hard — in the teeth of cynical opponents and irresponsible media — to bring about better relations between the United States and Iran after the ayatollah.